

Trump accepts North Korean offer of talks, on US terms

By James Cogan
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Top diplomats of the South Korean government, sent to Washington to brief the Trump administration on the outcome of talks with North Korea, gave an unscheduled press briefing Thursday evening US time.

South Korean national security adviser Chung Eui-yong, flanked by two other officials, delivered a short statement. Chung began by heaping sycophantic praise on US President Donald Trump, declaring that his “maximum pressure policy had brought us to this juncture.”

The “maximum pressure policy” has been the imposition of the harshest-ever economic sanctions against North Korea, combined with threats to “totally destroy” the poverty-stricken country if its regime does not accept to the “complete and verifiable” dismantling of its nuclear weapons and long-range missile programs.

According to the South Korean negotiators who took part in talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and other leading figures of his regime, North Korea is prepared to concede to US demands.

Chung Eui-yong told the press briefing that Kim assured them he is “committed to denuclearisation.” Furthermore, North Korea will “refrain from any nuclear or missile tests.” Pyongyang also “understands,” Chung declared, that the massive joint US and South Korean military exercises scheduled to take place next month “must continue.” Kim, he said, “expressed his eagerness to meet President Trump as soon as possible.”

Before any statement by the White House itself, Chung announced that “President Trump agreed to meet Kim Jong-un by May,” to achieve denuclearisation. He concluded that a “diplomatic process” would continue to “test the possibility of a peaceful resolution,” but that “pressure” on North

Korea would continue until it “matches words with concrete action.”

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders confirmed the South Korean statement. She said: “He [Trump] will accept the invitation to meet with Kim Jong-un, at a place and time to be determined. We look forward to the denuclearisation of North Korea. In the meantime, all sanctions and maximum pressure must remain.”

Thus far, North Korea has not issued any confirmation that it has agreed to “denuclearisation,” halt weapons’ testing or even talk with Trump and US officials. The decades-long perspective of the Pyongyang regime, however, has been to try to ensure its own survival and preserve the wealth of its elite by reaching an accommodation with US imperialism and the South Korean ruling class.

In 1994, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ending the substantial subsidies provided by Moscow to North Korea, Pyongyang struck an “Agreed Framework” with the Clinton administration. Under its terms, North Korea agreed to shut down its nuclear reactor that was capable of producing weapons’ grade material, in exchange for US assistance to construct light energy-generating reactors, the lifting of economic sanctions and the normalisation of diplomatic relations. Formally, North Korea and the US are still at war, as no peace treaty was signed at the end of the 1950–1953 Korean conflict.

Over the following years, the US repeatedly delayed meeting its side of the agreement, especially after 1998 when the South Korean government began actively pursuing its “Sunshine Policy.”

The aim of the Sunshine Policy was economic integration with North Korea, in which the Pyongyang regime would remain intact and serve as the

police-state apparatus for South Korean corporations moving into the North to exploit an ultra-cheap, brutally repressed workforce. The policy was accompanied by ambitious plans to develop transport and energy corridors that would link East Asia with the European Union. It was taken for granted that such an arrangement would ultimately lead to the removal of American military forces from the Korean Peninsula, and far closer economic and political relations between South Korea, Japan and China.

Powerful factions in the both the US and South Korean establishments opposed such a prospect and worked tirelessly to block improved relations with North Korea. In January 2002, the Bush administration blew up the agreement by labelling North Korea as part of its “axis of evil.” A year later, North Korea withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in response to provocative US claims that it was secretly enriching uranium. In 2006, it carried out its first test of a nuclear weapon.

Quagmired by its illegal invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration sought a deal with China and North Korea in 2007 to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear facilities and allow UN inspections, in return for yet more US promises to normalise relations. Pyongyang adhered to the pact but the Bush administration provocatively demanded more intrusive inspections, effectively terminating the agreement in 2009.

Under Kim Jong-un, the North Korean regime is attempting to leverage its alleged development of a small number of nuclear weapons to once again appeal to Washington for a rapprochement. The announcement of talks suggests the Trump administration is prepared to consider the possibility.

A factor in North Korea’s reported overtures is immense pressure from China, its only nominal ally. The Beijing regime has largely collaborated with Washington to ramp up and enforce the harsh economic sanctions that are strangling North Korea.

China has historically viewed North Korea as a valuable buffer state between its border and the US forces in South Korea. But the Beijing regime is deeply alarmed that Japan has seized on Pyongyang’s weapons program as a pretext to remilitarise, and also fears that the Trump administration will follow through on its threats to attack North Korea. Apart from Beijing’s concerns about the economic and political

fall-out of a war in East Asia, the outcome would most likely be a US-backed South Korean military occupation of North Korea. China’s preference would be a settlement along the general lines of the Sunshine Policy.

The Trump administration’s acceptance of the talks offer will have been influenced, to some extent, by the open opposition in sections of the US establishment to launching a war on North Korea. Military figures have warned that it would be most savage conflict since World War II, potentially claiming millions of lives. Economists have warned it could trigger global recession and stock market turmoil if it impacted heavily on South Korea and Japan, two of the main manufacturing exporters in the world.

Strategically, attacking North Korea was lambasted recently by US analyst Ely Ratner, in testimony to the US Congress, as an unnecessary “war of choice”—like the invasion of Iraq. It would, he asserted, only divert the US from preparing for “wars of necessity” arising from competition with China and other rivals for global hegemony.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the foreshadowed talks, if they proceed, the Korean Peninsula will remain a flashpoint in the deepening conflict between the US and China, with the great power intrigues over the fate of North Korea continuing to heighten the danger of world war.

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